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VOICING MY WRITING,
WRITING MY VOICE

Autoethnography as a way to explore and (re)think my personal and academic self

Gustavo González-Calvo

I thought I had filled my life from the top down, as Science states.
But then came my Son, so small, so beautiful, defying the universal laws, to fill my life from below.
He filled it even beneath life itself, beneath one’s own skin, as only life could be filled.

(Dedicated to my son Marcos)

Introduction

Legend has it that, many years ago, a butterfly saw the fastest and most precise arrow in the whole country passing by every day.

The butterfly dreamed of one day being as fast as the arrow, able to travel from one end of the country to the other in just a few seconds. And so, in search of its dream, it tried every day to fly faster and with more energy to reach its destination sooner.

Again and again, the butterfly tried. He never gave up, every day dawned with new illusions and a new attempt to be like the arrow. And, although he was looking for his dream more than anyone else, it was impossible for him, on every trip, not to stop to admire the beautiful flowers of the road, impossible not to chat with the animals of the forest or simply not to lie down to look at the beauty of the sky, where it played at guessing the shapes of the clouds.

Although the butterfly promised himself not to be distracted, every day the same thing happened: spread his wings to the wind and, within a few seconds, he had already stopped at a flower. So came the day when the very sad butterfly gave up. He knew that he would never be as fast and precise as the arrow.

And, that day, his dream was broken.

The animals in the forest, sorry to see their friend crying so much, decided to visit him.

“What’s the matter with you, little butterfly?” they asked. “I wanted to fulfill my dream of becoming as fast as the arrow I see passing before me every day. But I’ve realised it’s impossible. I’m too clueless, and soon after I start flying, I spend a lot of time admiring flowers, chatting with friends, or contemplating the sky. When I’m lucky enough to find out what my destiny is, it’s too late. I will never be as fast or as accurate as the arrow”, he lamented.

Accepting to be part of this book has been, for me, an enormous personal challenge. The illusion has been, at times, intimidating; I didn’t even know if I could fulfill the commission and, to this day, I’m not sure I’ve been up to the task. In any case, and as a result of my
commitment, I have written an autoethnography built around three key moments in my life: my beginnings in the world of qualitative research; the moment I began to publish my first works; and the moment I decided to apply for accreditation as a university professor, reflecting the advantages and disadvantages of having made qualitative research the cornerstone of my academic career. An academic career that, like the flight of the butterfly, is full of uncertainty, precariousness, and a hint of hope.

The elaboration of the different reports that form part of the autoethnography has been a process of integration of different tensions, expectations, illusions and disenchantments that were collected in the form of diaries, notes that I gather from conversations and encounters with friends, relatives and colleagues and extracts from relevant readings, all with the purpose of giving meaning to what I write. This process is not the fruit of a single day; on the contrary, it is the fruit of the last fifteen years, taking as a starting point my initial formation studies as a teacher.

This autoethnography, as it cannot be otherwise (notice the reader the prefix auto-, referred to the self), is a very personal process. This is because my personal experiences are the foundation of study. At the same time, it seeks to fulfill a clearly social objective, in an attempt to lead the reader to empathise with my world and my story. Thus, I examine how my personal, professional, emotional and cultural identity develops in the context in which I have lived, and how social forces influence my lived experiences (Chang, 2013). As Bochner and Ellis (2016) understand it, “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 65).

I have made every effort to combine the rigour of research with the creativity of styles of expression that are less rigid than those usual in academia; furthermore, I have sought a certain balance between reflection on the self and on the social and cultural environment in which it develops. Following the premise of Eriksson (2013), who pointed out that personal experiences must be embedded in a specific culture while connecting emotionally with the reader, I present here an honest writing, relevant, and easily intelligible. This does not mean, at all, that there is no space for scholarship. Rather, as an educator and researcher I feel a responsibility to provide appropriate and accessible language for diverse readers. I agree with Kincheloe (2008, p. 26) that “a living, relevant and effective critical pedagogy in the contemporary world must be at the same time intellectually rigorous and accessible to diverse audiences”.

I hope that, with all of this, the social and cultural function of the writing I present will be more remarkable. In its most purely social aspect, it is a story written to be told to someone, a product to be shared socially in which the reader is not a passive recipient, but someone willing to converse and put his or her life in relation to mine.

I know, with certainty, that this is a chapter full of subjectivities. It cannot be otherwise: I am a multiple being, changing, ephemeral at times, almost always contradictory.

Crossroads: my beginnings with autoethnographies

The year 2003 runs. Lulo da Silva becomes president of Brazil; South African John Maxwell Coetzee receives the Nobel Prize for Literature; activist Rachel Corrie is crushed by an Israeli tank for preventing the demolition of Palestinian homes; in the Democratic Republic of Congo the bloody civil war that began 14 years earlier continues, claiming the lives of more than a thousand people; and I, after a few years of studying Chemistry, decide to abandon that subject and study to become a teacher.

My parents have always made it clear to me that I should go to university (mainly my mother) who did not consider any other possibility. The expectations placed on me as a good student were high, which reinforced the idea that I should get an academic degree. With the
change of university career I thought I was facing a “decrease in my status”. I am aware that
the most valued professions are becoming so, often not because of the importance of their
role in society, but rather because of the difficulty of initial training. In Spain, an engineer, a
doctor, an architect, a pharmacist are professions of great social esteem from the very beginning
of studies. In this sense, deciding to start with the studies of a teacher was a small dilemma
because it was considered as something simple and, in many cases, superficial.

Privilege comes in different ways. One of my privileges was to have the opportunity to
pursue university studies; another was to have the opportunity to change disciplines. But
thinking of my parents, feeling reflected on them, I knew that they would be disappointed
by my decision to change schools. I remember my mother’s voice explaining repeatedly that
studies were what would allow me to lead a good life; and, as a mother, she understood that
more difficult studies meant a simpler life. “You’ll understand when you’re a father,” I think
I’m hearing from her. At that time I didn’t understand that phrase; my adult life, for the
moment, was such a distant project that it didn’t make any sense at all. After all, it is life that
gives meaning to words, it is life that inscribes them in our skin. I didn’t understand what it
meant to be a father. I was only interested in recovering my curiosity and experiencing another
way of facing my studies.

I began to read everything that fell into my hands, I had an eagerness to learn. As a result
of this desire to learn, I decided to enroll in a subject where the title caught my attention
from the beginning: “Research in Physical Education”. I remember thinking that, after all,
research could not be limited to the biomedical field, and that, although we teachers do not
wear white coats, we also have a lot to contribute to social research.

It was a demanding subject, which required a great willingness on the part of the student to
read, reflect and debate. Perhaps for this reason, very few students chose it. But at that point, it
was clear to me that there were two very different ways of tackling my new studies: deciding
to be a mediocre student – to survive, or pretending to do things as best as possible – to grow.

Believing that I had my survival needs assured, I felt the obligation to realise myself, to
understand myself, to renew myself, and to try to achieve higher goals. That was how, thanks
to Lucio – the then professor of the subject and, today, friend and departmental colleague – I
entered the world of educational research.

The first tasks were readings by Andrew Sparkes and Marti Silvennoinen (Sparkes &
Silvennoinen, 1999), both qualitative researchers in the field of Physical Education. I found
the readings magnificent, easy to read, empathic, profound. I was fascinated by the emphasis
that the stories placed on the personal but, at the same time, distrustful for the same reason.
After all, I was indebted to a quantitative past, a student of pure science, accustomed to num-
bers and statistical formulas; a world in which this frank opening to corporeality, identity, the
private, the individual, the autobiographical, called into question the objectivity of science.

Little by little, I got to know more about the qualitative field and I even began to write
my own life story (what could be interesting about telling my own experiences, who could be
interested in that except, perhaps, myself?). In spite of these initial doubts, the seed was being
planted that would be born shortly afterwards; I discovered that spending a daily time writing
about what was happening to me, what worried me, what excited me, was a way of feeling
better about myself. It was also clear to me that my stories, if read by others, would have to
be a gift to those readers who needed them (Goodall, 2008), a reflective attempt to construct
meaning in my life and in the lives of others.

The last year of my initial training I was awarded a research scholarship to work with
Lucio. We opted for a brief research sketch that would consist of knowing how the beliefs and
previous experiences of the students affected their initial training as teachers. We started from
the premise that teaching identities can be interpreted from a narrative approach and, as such, we rely methodologically on narrative research as a technique of reflection and awareness of the students. The project ended up in smoke, insofar as it was not completed and no research report came out. It could have been considered, then, a waste of time, since the system made it clear that only that which is profitable – in our case, publishable – has value. However, it served to find my guidance, a reference point I wanted to build on and continue to deepen. So I began a process of personal reflection, trying to give meaning to my life, and to work it out by analysing it and comprehending how my own experiences marked my way of understanding teaching.

It is important to clarify that, when I began my initial formation studies, I had never heard of the term autoethnography and knew very little about qualitative research, so I began to write without knowing what I was doing or why I was doing it. Not even today, 15 years later, are they common words within the Spanish research and educational field. If I had been asked what I meant by autoethnography back then, I would not have been able to articulate a coherent definition.

Now, more mature and more experienced, and also determined to follow a qualitative trajectory in which (auto)ethnographic gender is my main pillar, things have changed. In the Anglo-Saxon sphere there has been an important growth in interest in autoethnographies. Not only are there several books devoted specifically to the subject (e.g. Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Chang, 2008; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2009), but the first journal devoted exclusively to the autoethnographic method, the Journal of Autoethnography, was edited and published for the first time in 2020. It seems, therefore, a good time for teachers and researchers who are concerned about this methodology to go deeper and learn more about how to carry it out. On the other hand, and as I will deal with later, it is possible that choosing this path was a risky bet. Autoethnography, as a research method, continue to be surrounded by a certain marginal aura, and it is possibly less valued in an academic climate framed by neoliberalism and the culture of auditing in Western universities (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018; Sparkes, 2018).

With the idea and desire to begin my research journey – and with the conviction that research is useful if it provides indications of improvement to others, making a small contribution in the production of knowledge –, I become an avid reader of everything I find referring to qualitative research. It is true that more than fifteen years ago it was much more complicated to access scientific literature in this field, partly due to my own lack of knowledge, partly because it is not a widely accepted methodology in my country. But I had the stimulus and the illusion that I would be able to educate myself in this field, although I knew subconsciously that I would have to be, practically, self-taught.

“I have to learn, soak up what they write, improve my English language because it is clear that in my mother tongue there is little material that can help me” was a recurring thought. A thought from which I did not want to run away, from which I did not want to escape. Books, articles, more books … I begin to navigate (shipwreck perhaps?) in a sea full of great authors. Their surnames intimidate me and, at the same time, stimulate me to try to write like them someday. I wish I could, on some glorious day, write with the courage of Pelias, the mastery of Fernández-Balboa, the inspiration of Bochner, the sincerity of Sparkes and the clairvoyance of Denzin (e.g., Bochner, 2014; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Fernández-Balboa, 2001; Pelias, 2019; Sparkes, 1996). In an attempt to console myself I think that, for every great author, there are a handful of minor researchers, like mice prowling around a lion.

The referenced authors, without them even being aware of my existence, are becoming my mentors. How much I need mentors like that! But they are far away, I can’t count on more
help than their writings. So my doubts, my fears, the moments when I think about whether it would be better to throw in the towel or change the field of research are frequent.

After all, having changed studies means being older than the average age of my peers, and maybe it’s a good time to start working. However, I decide to go ahead and let reality moderate and simplify my ambitions; now, the illusion is stronger than everything else. My greatest doubt is: will I be able to find a subject to study in depth, is there a subject that remains unstudied and, if so, will I be the one to fill that void?

I get down to work: what do I need to start writing?

**Publishing my first articles: the individual writer**

Year 2009. Israel turns Gaza into a deadly trap for a million and a half Palestinians; the fight against climate change is vindicated through the so-called “hour of the planet”; the King of Pop, Michael Jackson, perhaps tired of not being able to sleep, decides to sleep forever; President Barack Obama wins the Nobel Peace Prize, in spite of developing a warmongering policy that is not worthy of recognition; and I publish my first article – an autoethnography – in a Spanish magazine with a certain reputation. I also pass the exams for the national competitions to get a job as a primary school teacher. In this way, my work seems assured and my future defined.

My life is beginning to demand a great deal of my attention, be it on a personal, professional or relational level. Job security avoids uncertainties and risks; I can lead a quiet, serene and uncomplicated life. Even so, I am not sure if this is what I want forever, if I have already fulfilled my own expectations. I have no way to compare my life with my previous lives, nor to make amends for the mistakes I make now in later lives; this is my only life, I have to live it all at a first attempt, without preparation and without foresight as to what will happen. It will be the passage of time, ultimately, who will tell me if I should have followed this path or another. In any case, it is true that on several occasions I find myself thinking that perhaps destiny had something different in store for me, that it was not a school where I was going to spend the rest of my working life.

I am beginning my doctoral studies and my research concerns are still alive – perhaps more alive and intense than ever. I also continue to devote much of my free time to reading. I am immersed in a phase of “read as much as you can”, convinced that the more I read about autoethnographic research, the more prepared I will be to write my own research when the time comes to break the fear of the blank page. I wonder when that time will come.

I read enough research manuals, project writing manuals and doctoral thesis manuals to know that the starting point of any research is to have clear objectives. The first step is to ask yourself a question and find a way to answer it. If this is the case, what has been the main objective that has aroused my interest in narratives: what was the original question? I have many questions, but I don’t have an answer. In the case of autoethnography, things get even more complicated. The autoethnography is a blurred genre (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Too many methods, techniques, approaches and epistemologies and, for more complication, what for some specialists are synonyms of the same term, for others mark notable differences. As a consequence, I do not fully understand some things, and some years have gone by since I wrote my first works and I wonder if it’s worth sending them for publication.

If writing is “thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic” (Morrison, 2019, p. 238), then I have to free myself from the pressure; let the magic emerge; let the themes flow until I find the need to know, to understand something about myself, my thoughts, my feelings, my meanings. From that liberation my first autoethnographic study was born. The work narrated certain personal experiences that were alternatives to the dominant, accepted and harmful cultural histories and stereotypes.
Accepting that the choice of the autoethnographic genre involved describing personal experiences that I wanted – and needed – to understand in greater depth and in a meaningful way, this first article took my disrupted self\(^1\) as a reference (e.g. González Calvo & Martínez Álvarez, 2009). In it, I describe how my life, a normal life until now, was interrupted by an injury. I begin to feel that writing is therapeutic for me and, perhaps, for readers who have experienced similar situations.

The study was not easy to publish in Spain. It was part of a methodology that was not widely accepted ten years ago, so that the reviewers of the work regarded it with suspicion, as little more than “a well-told story”. They didn’t even seem sure that a single person’s story deserved to be considered research. Although several works on a similar subject and methodology had already been published in other countries (e.g. Sparkes, 1996; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999), in my country it seemed somewhat worthless. However, I was convinced that the work was more than just a beautiful story. It is true that what I was talking about my life, giving my personal example; but the writing also sought to represent other people. It was a lesson to learn, an empathic guide to deal with the situations we sometimes have to face.

I kept trying to publish the study, until it finally saw the light (see González Calvo & Martínez Álvarez, 2009). It would be unfair if I didn’t acknowledge that, since then, narrative studies and autoethnographies have become increasingly important in Spain. But they are still far from becoming a unique approach, and the few Spanish researchers interested in autoethnography who want to disseminate and publish their work have to do so in international journals. I am one of those researchers. The question of what I should write and publish touches the heart of everything I write. I intend not to censor the expression of my emotions, not to transfigure myself from ignoble to noble, to show myself as I am, to be truly myself. Although, with writing, you never know. Maybe at a certain moment I am myself and at another moment I am simply inventing. When it comes to writing, how can one be sure?

The readings and the habit of writing daily are developing my ability to do it better, although I still miss having a close mentor who can help me focus my research. Although autoethnographies are often written alone, they are a matter of one’s own self, I could use some expert help, someone to help me stop writing by simple intuition. But, if even the experts don’t seem to have clear limits and characteristics of qualitative research, how can I know what kind of work the academics applaud and reject? How can I know if what I do is good or bad, or to what extent it is a question of interpretation? What are the topics that can open up an opportunity for me?

As a result of chance I come across an article whose title catches my attention and which may guide my future writings: “Qualitative quality: Eight “big tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research”. Perhaps this is what I need at the moment, a clear orientation on the criteria that make an excellent piece of writing: rigour, a dignified subject, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and coherence (Tracy, 2010).

For someone like me – who speaks the language of insinuation knowing that others are not good at reading my mind; more eloquent on the page than in conversations; better at saying than speaking – it doesn’t seem complicated to meet the criteria. I write them in a note that I have next to my computer, to keep them in sight, well present. I begin to write; I am the one who directs, my writing obeys me. The criteria help me, they are a guide, they offer me security; but after a short time I discover myself forcing my writing to fit it within the framework established by Tracy, by adjusting his criteria to my needs.

Perhaps there are teachings that one should not ignore; otherwise one runs the risk of becoming a barbarian. But I don’t want to be the one who directs my writing. I want it to...
be the one who directs me, the one who writes me. Maybe, after all, I don’t mind becoming a barbarian; maybe the university prefers brutal professionals, incapable of creating intra- and interpersonal ties, people concerned only with accountability. Who knows?

We had dreams, we had high hopes: the price of living, the cost of the career

2016. Surprisingly, the Nobel Prize for Literature does not go to bookstores, but to record stores thanks to Bob Dylan; Donald Trump wins the election and becomes the 45th President of the United States, confirming that great fuss and foolishness are the gateway to current politics; the ceasefire of the civil war in Syria begins, but the refugees fleeing the country are still socially untold, they do not have a history that makes them visible; the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro distract the population with banalities, while cultural life is reduced to a permanent revelry; and I share dreams and illusions.

Thanks to the help that social networks provide to shy people like me, in 2010 I came into contact, virtually, with José.

It was by chance that José published an article in the same volume and issue of the magazine in which my first autoethnographic study was published (González Calvo & Martínez Álvarez, 2009). After reading his work, I became more interested in him, always from a distance. We weren’t too far physically – barely 200 kilometres apart – but we didn’t know each other personally, so it took a few months before I decided to write him an email. I received his reply, we met in person and began a path of friendship, research and shared illusions.

José, always utopian and a dreamer, tried to transform the educational reality from qualitative research. His research process, like mine, starts from his initial training as a teacher. It could be said that we were soul mates: there were not too many people researching in Spain in this field at that moment and, suddenly, two people with the same interests appear. At that time I had neither started my doctoral thesis, nor my work at university. I just wanted to learn, it was my only objective.

We began to work together on some research, always with the idea of improving education, something that would be capable of responding to the demands expected of the school, the teaching staff and society in general. In this way, we kept in mind the social, cultural and political aspects that should not go unnoticed by any educator.

Shortly afterwards – when we were both already working at university in a very precarious situation, although with a prosperous future, as it seems – we published some of our works, all of them in Spanish and with a clear qualitative and autoethnographic orientation (e.g. González Calvo & Barba, 2013).

One morning in January 2016, almost at dawn, I received a call from José’s brother. I knew, before picking up the phone, what he was going to tell me. When it comes to death, the phrases are left half-hearted; without saying anything, everything is said. On the other side of the phone there was only sobbing. Feeling lost, I looked around, not seeing anything. José could not overcome a leukaemia that devoured him in a matter of months. He was only 39 years old and had a three-year-old son. His early death killed us all a little.

I was with him just a week before he died. We didn’t overlook the irony that someone determined to give voice to others, had to be interpreted now by means of devices: you only had to look at the monitor to know how many times his heart was beating, the number of breaths and who knows what those other strange numbers would mean. But that was temporary. We had plans, concerns, great hopes; so great that there is no machine that can interpret them. Our pretensions were not humble and, half-jokingly, half-seriously, we said that as soon as he left the hospital we would start working on our first international article. It was about
time they knew us beyond our borders! Let everyone know: the new Fernández-Balboa and Sparkes get to put qualitative research where it belongs!

At that time, José was one of my best friends and my closest colleague. Next to each other we had been learning to write critically on different educational topics. Our works were filled with the most exquisite zeal, the most sincere illusion and fierce idealism. Today my thoughts are with him. I never remember him because of his publications, nor because of his research profile. I remember him, and I miss him, because he was a great man, a great friend.

I am convinced that, at least in part, José was unable to cope with the stress and pressure of the system. He worked too hard to nurture the university system he loved and was proud of; the same system that promotes a helplessness pedagogy, fatigue and loneliness. The same mechanism that is framed within the precept of “don’t think too much of anything; think only of yourself”. Although José was always generous and never thought only of himself, he ended up being part of a model that forces one to change oneself, accepting uncritically and submitting to the conditions of exploitation and alienation of the socioeconomic and cultural environment. All of us who want to make a career at the university accept this model; there is no possible alternative. Either you submit, or you are left out. It absorbs us, and we belong to it. It suffocates until it defeats.

Fortunately, I am beginning to glimpse clearly what before, perhaps due to the haze of my vanity, I could not see: that the neoliberal system applied to higher education enthroned self-interest, competitiveness, triumph and foul play; that human relations are a constant struggle in which, as in a fierce fight, only one can stand.

The discourse of the pedagogy of helplessness and isolation is the normal and natural condition of the university. This is what we who work here have to struggle with; an attempt at self-realisation, at being as effective as possible, trying, of course, to emerge from our own inner desire (Han, 2015). Within this model each professional possesses an individual capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that has to revalue continuously. What emerges is the profile of a struggling teacher who tries to reach his objective regardless of the sacrifice: the goal comes first. The ideology of success leads us to measure people – our own co-workers – in numerical terms: how many articles have you published? What is your h-index? In what quartile is your latest publication? The person who, in these terms, does not reach the minimum required, is considered unproductive, lazy, a useless burden for the system. I see it in my work, I hear it in the corridors, I perceive it in the distrust shown by other colleagues/competitors; professionals who growl and show their teeth, each one defending what they think belongs to them. Instead of encouraging a university community based on conversations, collaborations among colleagues and open to the perspectives of other researchers, it has become a kind of battleground of “belligerent careerists protecting turf, seeking notoriety, and competing for limited resources” (Bochner, 2014, p. 18).

The truth is that no one told me that academic life was going to be hard and full of setbacks, or that I was going to feel bewildered and isolated. Seen from the outside, it seemed something completely different, something idyllic. Nor did I know, then, that choosing a scientific area whose primary function is social application – qualitative research within the realm of education – was going to play a relatively minor role in my promotion and evaluation options within the university. Nor, either, that forging a successful curriculum vitae could be a matter of money – attendance at congresses, translations of my papers into English if I want them to have a chance of being published, payment for publication, are not within everybody’s reach. In short: the only criterion for being able to take part in the game was not going to be, of course, that of professional worth in its twofold teaching and research aspect. If not, how do you explain why so many professionals with as much or more worth than mine are
(self) forced to abandon it? How is it possible that there are so many morally weak people who are able to make their way by breaking the rules? It is clear that the one who deserves it does not succeed, the one who works, the one who makes an effort. The system expels those who, having talent, cannot finance a career (Liu, 2011). The discourse of meritocracy is a deception, pure performance of excellence; we are surrounded by people who break the rules and are rewarded. Possibly we have all been tempted, at one time or another, to break the rules in order to benefit from the system; but, if the rules of the game are not followed, life becomes meaningless. In my case, I’ve lost the desire – and also the talent, if I ever had it – to lie and deceive. And, without that talent, what am I going to do in this area where the trap is rewarded?

No one told me anything about that, and yet, until recently, I would have given everything to make a career in college. I recognise that my arrogance plays a very important part in the decision. How good it sounds to be someone recognised in a field, to work in the university! If it’s someone like me, full of fears and with little self-confidence, it sounds even better. But, if I learned something from José’s death, it was to relativise and trust life. Now I know that it is normal to have doubts and to feel lost; that there are moments in which it is necessary to rest, to enjoy; that it is not always necessary to have a goal, sometimes it is enough to want to enjoy what is being done; and that I have to try to be happy as I am, with my family, with my work, with my writings, without allowing myself to be entangled by ulterior goals that only confuse me. After all, who was going to tell that boy without too much self-confidence that one day he would defend a doctoral thesis, or that he would have a fantastic family?

The last time I saw José was in my dreams. He told me that when we die, we do not entirely die, but that we are suddenly everywhere. That we become stories.

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**Always running to catch a runaway train**

It is the year 2019 and the Brazil declares a state of emergency due to the fires in the Amazon, considered the “lung of the planet”; the Nobel Prizes in Science consolidate their inequality by awarding nine men and no women; a mother and a daughter – along with more than a thousand other people so far this year – die hugging in front of Lampedusa; the heatwave in Greenland will have devastating consequences all over the planet; the far-right policy enters the European scene with force; Israel continues to cover the Palestinian territory in blood; and I have been using the computer application for almost three hours to apply for my accreditation as a university professor.

How did I get here? Everything has gone too fast, I’ve hardly had time to stop and think if it is at the university where I want to be. Life passes between flutters: one day you find yourself wanting to fly in order to be free, and the next you are fluttering with the intention of landing somewhere safe.

These years have been a journey from the pleasure of learning towards the fulfillment of one’s duty. I have learned that, in a university career, academia condemns what is useless, and what is useless is what is not profitable. But I have also learned that, as with life, you must go out and look for it; and, when you find it, you have to squeeze all its juice.

In this attempt to enjoy and be happy with what I do, I choose to dedicate myself only to qualitative research, convinced of the ethics that accompanies this type of research. The quantitative research in which I have participated, although it was a great weight when aspiring to get ahead in my professional career, has ceased to make sense to me. I just don’t want to be the kind of man given to organise his life around a curriculum vitae. It is not just that I understand numbers less and less (and voices more and more); it’s that I do not share the fact that quantitative research manipulates variables and statistics because it manipulates people.
and their lives; I do not share the confidence in questionnaires answered one day and that fit you into a predefined category *in perpetuum*, even though today I may not be the same as yesterday; I do not feel represented by a number within a Likert scale; and, above all, I do not trust that there is a universal theory that supports people’s behaviours and purposes. Maybe I am not clear about the path I want to follow in life. But I am understanding what I do not want to do from now on.

I do not get a clear idea of what my professional career at university has to offer, and yet something tells me that I must continue on my way. I am not so vain as to believe that someone like me can contribute too much to the social world, to believe that my words are undoubtedly useful to establish consolation, correct injustices, open spaces for dialogue and seek ways to improve our lives (Bochner, 2014; Pelias, 2019). But I decide to commit myself to continue dedicating part of my life to listening, reading and writing; to situate myself in the midst of culture and to understand the contexts in which cultural meanings that are important to me are negotiated, validated and produced; to be an (auto)ethnographer. After all, I lead a life that allows me to continue writing, a (perhaps illusory) life of permanence and security.

I do not have a map, I do not know where I am going, and I can hardly establish a plan. But I am determined to contribute what I can to make a better society and a more meaningful life for myself and others, especially for those who enter life without some of the advantages that I enjoy and that determine my writing. I am, after all, a white, heterosexual, middle-class man with a high college education, a stable job, a good career behind me, and a family I love. I guess I am the embodiment of how effort and tenacity can lead to a promotion symbolised by academic titles, someone confident in oneself; someone coherent and serious whose passions have been replaced by a cold rationality. Just the opposite of who I really am!

The truth is that I am lucky without much merit: it was chance that made me this way. I did not have to do anything to be a man, neither white, nor Spanish, nor so many other things. I would be a fool to deny it all, because it is clear to me that being this way has made my life easier than if I had been born a woman, black, homosexual, African and so on. My identity is different from that of many other people, and yet it tries to merge into them. Am I not being too utopian; is not my ego playing a trick on me and I am perhaps giving too much importance to myself? To be honest, it seems like a titanic task to build a better society and care for one’s own well-being and that of others in these uncertain days in which haste, standardisation, uncertainty and risk about the future (Piotrowski & Ruitenberg, 2016) are the characteristics that best define us.

I may be the least qualified to worry about others; I’m not even sure where I want to work for the rest of my life! Uncertainty is also something that surrounds me. While it is true that I have job security (my job as a university professor is, at the moment, accessory, without being the main economic support), I feel overwhelmed and trapped, not infrequently, by so many insecurities. I am convinced that many of them are nothing more than an invention of the system, a fiction created by the progression of human development, the advance of science and technology. As Giddens (1999) explains, “manufactured risk is expanding into most dimensions of human life … people have to take a more active and risk-infused orientation in their relationships and commitments” (p. 4). In this way, uncertainty becomes my (our) way of life and, who knows, perhaps the only way of life available today.

Thus we live with a permanent sense of lack and guilt, of uncertainty and uneasiness, of ephemeral illusions. The system demands and, when we approach the goal, it moves away; it leads us to super-produce, making it clear that we do not publish because we are worth it, but rather that we are worth it because we publish. In the moment that it is not so, we will be waste for the system; you may have contributed a lot to the university, but the university has a short
memory and no loyalty (Bochner, 2014). As we ultimately compete against ourselves, we try to surpass ourselves until we fall down (Han, 2015). We always demand more of ourselves; we can always do more. The lament “I can do nothing” has no place today; being more able leads to a destructive reproach of the self and self-aggression. Life, turned into something ephemeral, like water slipping through our fingers, is simple work and production.

The main problem for all those who are not fortunate enough to be able to choose how to live is that you are never free; the imperative of efficiency forces you to an increasingly high performance. A gratifying rest is never achieved, this being the modus vivendi and modus operandi of higher education professionals in Western societies (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018; Lorenz, 2012).

The truth is that I am privileged, I have that freedom of choice. Shall I continue working as a teacher for the rest of my life, or shall I decide, when the opportunity presents itself, to try to make a career in the university? If I follow the second path, the truth is that I have already covered a good part of the journey. I have several important publications, enough to meet the requirements of a university professor in Spain. It is true also that there are many other requirements that I don’t have — stays abroad, management work at the university, scholarships and research grants, among others — but the mechanism is a huge monster that devours everything and is never satisfied. Its motto, “It is forbidden to waste time, forbidden not to comply with the requirements of the system, forbidden to enjoy what you do”, prevents you from losing sight of the perspective that everything you do is work; and work is what is profitable. Obedience, gentleness, submission, dependence is the mold that the academic system imposes. The system is unique and implacable, undermining courage, creativity and the essential. The system is not allowed to pay for enthusiasm; the only god is the system.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath and try to remember about what made me want to work at the university and how my beginnings were in the world of research that others will now have to value. In six months I will receive a reply to my application for accreditation; if it is positive, the answer to which path to choose may open up before me. But, as always happens to me, I do not know if this is where I want to be. I feel that my own identity is a mere elusive illusion; when is a process of growth finished, when does somebody start to have clear pretensions in life? I’m not sure that this is my place; to be honest with myself, I’m not sure that any place belongs to me.

It is hard for me to see the end of this long-distance race. Maybe ten years ago, when I was a little younger — and possibly with more enthusiasm to promote at university, partly because I didn’t know the mechanisms that govern its functioning — everything was clearer to me. Now I may be more reflective; or perhaps I am simply less courageous.

To tell the truth, university conditions are worse than those offered by my job as a school-teacher offers me: the salary is lower and, possibly, the labour stress is higher. One of the attractions that a university degree could have is greater freedom; however, nothing could be further from the truth. Working at the university implies continuous accountability (Christensen, 2011) through procedures of quantitative measurement of scientific publications, the entrenchedment of meritocracy as an inspiration for the distribution of resources (Liu, 2011), and the attrition and disenchantment of professors with the profession (Visotskaya, Cherkashina, Katcin, & Lisina, 2015). Thus, it is unsurprising that cases of alcoholism, depression and suicide have increased among university professors (Shaw & Ward, 2014). No one is prepared for failure, and the university does not understand failures; the exploitation of oneself as a way to avoid pain and frustration leads to exhaustion, generating depressed and tired teachers.

Perhaps what attracts me to the university is the aura of intellectuality that has always surrounded it. But in this, perhaps I am also mistaken. The circle in which I move is small, I
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do not have many opportunities to meet different researchers, to open perspectives in other places or to participate in new research projects. In this circle – and I’m afraid that, even if the diameter were enlarged, things would not change too much – not everything is lived in a climate of intellectuality: we are not a group of academics dressed in suits who, while listening to jazz music and drinking tea, take the opportunity to discuss Faulkner. Rather, many of the issues surrounding our work have to do with bureaucratic issues, which leave little time and desire for what is important: to improve our teaching and research work.

With all this, professional and academic life becomes something impersonal, a source of anxiety and desolation; stability, order, control, and knowing you own your own life, are nothing more than chimeras. Your professional career turns into a stray train, a train that escapes between your fingers when it seemed like you were about to get on it. This is the case of Spanish universities and so many other Western universities that conform to the neoliberal model. In particular, collectives of university professors, unions, organisations and institutions have demonstrated against the Spanish system due to the abusive conditions of accreditation and evaluation of research activity imposed by Royal Decree 415/2015 (B.O.E., 2015). This legal regulation has irrationally hardened the criteria for entry and development of university professional careers. One has to live for and to enter the system: long-term stays in other countries, directing research projects, obtaining external funding to cover research costs, etc. All this, without any thanks or recognition to the teachers who, in a precarious situation and in the midst of a brutal neoliberal policy of cutbacks and precariousness, are doing a commendable job.

If you manage to enter the system and exceed the required criteria, the train will run off again. It’s time to face the university itself. The brutal cuts in higher education (e.g. González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018) make getting a stable place and promotion a very complicated affair; an affair that leaves many victims on the road.

It is a vicious and dangerous circle: in order to have a professional career you need to have a good curriculum (at least one that is “weighty” enough, in a literal and metaphorical sense) and some experience, which depends, in large part, on having optimum resources, whether economic, material or human. Also, in order to promote and advance within the career, it is essential to direct doctoral theses, research projects, participate in doctoral programs. … Who, in their right mind, would want to dedicate themselves to making a career within the autoethnographic field? How can they not succumb to the quantitative side, much more practical, quicker and easier to publish in impact magazines? How can they not choose the path of objectivity, if subjectivity unfailingly implies vulnerability?

This scenario depicts an unflattering situation that may lead many teachers and researchers to feel pressured, to choose the “easy path” to adapt to the requirements of the profession/institution so as not to be excluded from it. I do not want to disenchant anyone with my words, nor lose confidence in my/our possibilities; but it is opportune to reflect on it so as not to sin out of “success fundamentalism” (Balastera, 2001) that leads to a complete isolation and a continuous search for trivial credentialism. I want to believe – and, in so far as I can, fight – for a university career ethic that cares about and defends the particular circumstances of those of us who work in it; that it is possible to care for others, to offer them help and to attend to their requests, without looking at ourselves with suspicion and without putting stones in our way; that it is possible to carry out teaching and research useful for society, where people have a voice and are not just a number on a form; that the desire to reflect, debate and criticise is stimulated in a free environment and without coercion. If I do not believe – and fight – that this may be possible, it should not surprise me to discover that, from our universities, we are all collaborating in the formation of competitive, desolate, immoral students/citizens.
I think it is time to try to make the university an open and sustained space for friendly conversations, sincere collaborations, mutual trust. Perhaps I have become an eternal dreamer, but that is the charm of dreams: they make you disconnect from reality. Besides, there is room for the utopian, to keep on walking. Without going any further, in recent years I have been able to overcome my profile as an “individual writer” and have been able to surround myself with people who have helped me immensely and unselfishly. There are times when the difficulty, the indignation, the precariousness, the shame are so great that they lead to the only thing you can do: act.

I will therefore try to ensure that this contractual precariousness and the choice of my research career do not diminish my illusions and concerns. And, if at any time I begin to think that maybe I am the problem, I will have to remember that this is exactly how the system wants me to think. I don’t have to do it alone. There are nooks and crannies of solidarity, of community, of humanity.

Reflections

When you decide to tell a personal story, an autoethnography, you have to assume that you will not be the same person when you finish writing. In the time between this beginning and this end something happens: life. In addition, as social beings, our stories develop in society; our identities are shaped around our past stories, those that happen to us right now and those that we have yet to live. Each day we create our own history, these are the ones that constitute our medium of being (Frank, 2010). That is why I have decided to tell my story: this is part of my life.

On the other hand, I consider it my moral obligation to try to make visible, as far as I can, the political discourses, the neoliberal and capitalist measures and dilemmas facing university professors today. We can surrender and play the established game, or we can try to rewrite history.

It is important to keep in mind that members of university institutions deserve to be considered “an end in itself”, not an instrument to the benefit of neoliberal policies that, in no way, help to promote justice, well-being and a better life.

It is a story written with the reader in mind; a story that believes in the power of autoethnography and the lived experience of an ordinary life, a story that values and gives voice to subjective experiences. In the process of writing, I have often thought about the possible risks – personal and professional – embedded in this type of studies. I want you, as a reader, to know this story; what do you think of me, and of my work? I trust in your ability to interpret and evaluate the text from your own personal perspective, so that you can provide answers to the dilemmas I have been posing here. I would be grateful if you could make your own contribution to my own story.

Finally, I will try to answer the following question: What can this writing be used for? At best, it can serve to feed and continue the debate about the future of teaching and academic research that affects the personal and professional lives of so many teachers; a life that, in recent years, seems impregnated with alarming signs of corrosion; a life devoid of intellectual freedom and replete with personal impoverishment. In the worst-case scenario, as a writer it will have helped me to avoid internalising, completely, the resignation to “this is what there is”. Because, if I had not written it, I would have contributed to perpetuating a mechanistic system which, instead of fostering my capacities to lead a full and true life, would have created a sensation of silent despair, boredom, fatigue and loneliness (Han, 2015).
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Conclusion

28 September 2019. Marta’s hair dances freely on her shoulders; Marcos lets the Moon rest, the night needs no more brightness than his eyes; and I, even being a loner, endure the deadly sins as soon as I see them. All together, all at once. Greed, because I want the gold of our time to be only for us. Pride, knowing that it is I, and no one else, who is by their side. Lust, because my senses are awakened not to miss a single detail. Envy, which I feel strongly towards myself. Anger, when we understand that society conspires to steal our laughter, that sound with which we want to fall asleep. Gluttony, is insatiable the feeling of wanting to kiss them all the time. Well, now that I think of it, I do not feel all the capital sins: laziness does not exist next to them.

I close the computer application for my accreditation as a university professor, leave the office and ride in the car back home. I open the window to let the winter cold in. It is not so cold, after all. Given the way we are killing the planet, doubting that there can be a point of “no return” to stop climate change, trusting that science can get us out of it and acting, day after day, as if time were what we have to spare, I wonder how the system manages so that nothing that does not serve our immediate self-interest is able to move us. How have we let them corrupt our character like that? How have we come to believe that the world and the solar system revolve around ourselves? Why does nothing connect with our concerns anymore?

I turn on the radio, put in the Dire Straits CD and go straight to the track “Where do you think you are going?” (Knopfler, 1979). Mark Knopfler’s deep, serene voice asks the question directly to me; it is a dialogue between him and me: “Where do you think you are going? I think you don’t know. You got no way of knowing. There’s really no place you can go”. I understand the song as a wake-up call, as an awakening. Distrust, subordination, uncertainty, are all along the way, so it is best to think twice before you get going and get caught in the trap. The road is demanding, there is no doubt about it. But there are times when we have to fight, when we have to face boredom, uncertainty and risk with great doses of illusion and naivety.

I decide to change the CD, I prefer something that clears my mind off concerns. “When I wake up, well I know I’m gonna be the man who wakes up next to you. When I go out, I know I’m gonna be the man who goes along with you.” The Proclaimers (Reid & Reid, 1988) find the key. I start the car. The asphalt now seems more solid than ever; my path does not follow a purpose, but exists for them, with them and for them. And I think, smiling, life has shown a good move by offering me a route just when I needed it most: the road back home.

I arrive at my destination, turn off the car and enter the house. I kiss my wife and my son. It is dark and I have seen hardly anything of him today. I feel a twinge of grief: I would not want to stop being available to them for anything in the world.

Once in bed, I tell Marcos the story “The Arrow and the Butterfly”. At the end of the story, I explain that the important thing is not to have a clear path to follow and want to reach as quickly as possible, like the arrow. The important thing is to aspire to be like the butterfly: sensitive, tender, delicate, kind. Someone who enjoys the path as they walk along it; someone who, although capable of flying alone, decides to do so surrounded by friends, knowing that this is the best way to enjoy the journey and to go further; someone who faces their fears … and overcomes them; someone who differentiates the aroma that each flower gives off because they have taken the trouble to know and appreciate them; someone who pauses to figure out the shapes of the thousand clouds in the sky, knowing that there are few things more important.

When he sleeps, I whisper in his ear that he must love, take care and spoil himself, just as we love, take care, and spoil him. He should not make decisions based only on his safety and protection, for it is worth being brave in life. He should exercise his power without subjugating others. And he should not be in a hurry to get there.
Acknowledgements

To Marta and Marcos, for helping me choose the words I need, on paper and in life. And for helping me to disregard those that hurt.

Note

1 Paradoxically, and also unfortunately, just ten years later I published a new body autoethnography following the diagnosis of a disease (González Calvo & Varea, 2019), following the disrupted self model.

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